

In Search of Sienkiewicz's Zagłoba: Clues From Genealogy Records

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Jan Onufy Zagłoba is a beloved fictional character with a legendary fondness for drink who appears frequently in Nobel Laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz's historical novels. Zagłoba has been said to be a cross between Homer's Ulysses and Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff because of his propensity for drinking and exaggerated tales of his youthful adventures. He is portrayed as a lover of food and wine, and a great braggart. The world renowned stage actress, Helena Modjeska (Modrzejewska), a close friend of Sienkiewicz, and various other sources, assert that Zagłoba was based on the person of **Captain Rudolf Antoni Józef Korwin Piotrowski** (1813-1883) (Modjeska, Helena. *Memories and Impressions of Helena Modjeska. An Autobiography*. New York: The MacMillan Co., 1910, p. 282; Miłosz, Czesław. *The History of Polish Literature*. Berkeley:

UC Press, 1969, pp. 309-310).

Thus, it appears that the loveable Zagłoba was a portrait of a real-life character who, after fighting in the Polish Uprising of 1830-31, found his way to France and later to California. "It is...generally accepted that Jan Zagłoba, the Polish Falstaff and one of the most memorable characters in all of Polish literature, is based on the person of Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski, a seventy-five-year old émigré [*editor: he died at 70*] and eccentric, whom Sienkiewicz met in San Francisco" noted Konstantin Symmons-Symonolewicz (Thomas Napierkowski, "Sienkiewicz in America: 1876 and 1991," *Polish American Studies*, vol. 49, 1992, pp. 45-55).

Much has been written about Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski – in Polish, French and English. By all accounts he had a great fondness for "wine, women and song" (Modjeska, *Memories and Impressions*, p. 287). He loved a bawdy joke, had a great sense of humor, and an eye for the ladies. With it all, he had courtly manners that befitted his role as warrior, civic activist in his adopted country, and as an educated Polish patriot perpetually siding with the cause of liberty for all peoples (Modjeska, *Memories and Impressions*, p. 307; *Polish Pioneers of California*, Chicago: Polish Roman Catholic Union of America, 1940, p. 74; Robert Bielecki, *Słownik biograficzny oficerów powstania listopadowego*, vol. II, p. 297). Modjeska personally knew Piotrowski and she gave him a collection of her books as a donation for The Society of Poles in America that he was associated with (Edward J. Wheeler, ed., *Current Literature*, New York: The Current Literature Publishing Co., vol. 46, January 1909, p. 668). "Author Met 'Zagłoba' in San Francisco" proclaimed *The San Francisco Call* (22 March 1907), referring to Sienkiewicz.

BERKELEY, March 21.—Professor Charles Mills Gayley informed his class in English at the university today that one of the most prominent characters in Sienkiewicz's novels—"Zagłoba"—was met by the Polish author in San Francisco and there inspired Sienkiewicz with the idea of embodying his characteristics in the person of Zagłoba. The man figures in three of the Polish writer's stories, "With Fire and Sword," "The Deluge" and "Pan Michael."

We can trace the movements of Piotrowski through genealogic records (immigration documents, vital statistics and census records, newspaper articles, and City Directories) (see links at the end of this article). From these we learn Piotrowski's birth date, that he married Marguerite Martin de Chambaud on the 2nd of January 1839 in Agonges, France, and that he had two children there, Władysław (Ladislaus) who died in 1841

at the age of 18 months and Angelina Josephine Marie Stephanie born in 1842. In 1844, two years after her daughter's birth, Marguerite died. Angelina Josephine married French engineer Léon de Saint-André. Rudolf's granddaughter, Yvonne Marie Amelie de Saint-André was born in 1872 in Saintes, France.

There is no evidence that Angelina Josephine accompanied Rudolf to New Orleans in 1846. In New Orleans Piotrowski established "The Polish Committee" to raise money for the 1846 Polish Uprising. A year later he was fund-raising in Washington, DC. Piotrowski made his way to California in 1849 through Iowa, Nebraska and Northern Colorado. During the trek he married a very young English woman, Angela Lillian Norris [sic] [*editor: probably Morris (see Lillian Morris by H. Sienkiewicz)*], who died *en route* to California (*Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. xxvi, pp. 501-503). We can establish the particulars of Rudolf's birth and parentage (17 April 1813; born in Kamień, near Lublin; his father, Antoni, was a Polish officer, and so on). Piotrowski's life is summarized in the eulogy delivered by his close friend, Aleksander Bednawski, with whom he fought in the Polish Uprising of 1830-31 (*Daily Alta California*, vol. 35, 13 April 1883). Rudolf Piotrowski was a friend of General Krzyżanowski, Polish-born U.S. Civil War hero who, for a time, ran a saloon in San Francisco. Though nearly 50 in 1861-62, Rudolf fought in the U.S. Civil War, first as a Captain and then as a Major (*Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. xxvi). Piotrowski's "circle" were fellow émigrés of varying backgrounds seeking refuge in California from persecution abroad. Rudolf played a significant role in California history. He was a founding member of the San Francisco Pioneer Association. In 1860 he was living in Calaveras County (Gold Country) – a late "49er".

A few years later he can be found in Sebastopol, California (a town which he named -- for the allied victory over Russia in the Crimean War) and where he ran a store using the surname Korwin (Bielecki, *Słownik biograficzny*, vol. II, p. 297; Charles Morley, Charles, ed., *Portrait of America: Letters of Henry Sienkiewicz*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1959, p. 265; *Sacramento Daily Union*, 27 January 1864).

As a designated "Political Agent of the Polish Government on the Pacific Coast" Piotrowski travelled the Western States to raise money for "Polish Aid". He worked as a storekeeper in the warehouse division of a customs house in San Francisco. In 1863 he was Vice President of the Central Polish Society of the Pacific Coast in San Francisco. He was a naturalized US citizen (1857) and a voter (1866 California Great Register of Voters). Piotrowski claimed as friends two California governors, Newton Booth and Romualdo Pacheco (*Polish R.C. Union of America. Polish Pioneers of California*, 1940, p. 46; Przygoda, J. *Polish Americans in California, 1827-1977*. Polish American Historical Association, California Chapter, 1978). "There is no doubt that Piotrowski was the Captain of Booth's short story "After Dark" (*Polish R.C. Union of America. Polish Pioneers of California*, 1940).

Apparently he was an opera fan. Capt Corwin Petrowski (sic) affixed his name to a letter addressed to Mme. Stella Bonheur (mezzo-soprano, born 1855), praising her as an "artiste" and requesting she select an opera in which to appear for a "complimentary benefit" (*Daily Alta California*, 12 September 1867). No spouse or children are listed with Rudolf in San Francisco in the 1870 census. By 1872, Rudolf was teaching language at San Francisco's Healds Business College.

California Governor José Antonio Romualdo Pacheco Jr. (October 31, 1831 – January 23, 1899) appointed Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski as State Commissioner of Immigration in San Francisco in

1873. By 1878 Piotrowski was retired, but he remained active in the Polish Community as an officer of the Polish Society of California, which, by the way, welcomed members of all nationalities supporting the cause of liberty (and was comprised of men of all faiths, or lack thereof).

From the 1880 census we learn that Piotrowski was living as a roomer with a family. In the early 1880s, shortly before his death, City Directories describe Piotrowski's profession as "capitalist." Rudolf Antoni Józef Korwin Piotrowski died in France (21 February 1883) where he had travelled to seek medical help from Dr. Xavier (Kszawery) Gałęzowski for failing eyesight. Piotrowski's obituary mentions that his married daughter was at his bedside at the time of his death in France.

Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski was buried in a pauper's grave ("fosse commune") at Old Ivry Cemetery (cimetièrre parisien d'Ivry) on February 27th, 1883 (44, Avenue de Verdun, Ivry-sur-Seine). There is no headstone but the death is noted in the cemetery register (personal communication, Barbara Klosowicz).

www.polishclubsf.org/Bednawski%20to%20Piotrowski.pdf
www.polishclubsf.org/Piotrowski%20in%20City%20Directories.pdf
www.polishclubsf.org/Newspapers.htm

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Ms. Mroczek Morris maintains a site with information about Zagłoba, Piotrowski, Poles in Northern California and a bibliography of related subjects.